

## Aristotle's Pure Thought

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Aristotle is now enjoying his greatest popularity since the Renaissance. This popularity is nowhere more evident than in ethics. Virtue ethicists, in particular, regard him as a founding father; many others consider his views on moral responsibility, practical reason, justice, friendship, and pleasure as viable alternatives.<sup>1</sup> This viability is perhaps epitomized by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's use of Aristotelian ethics to support international policy initiatives.<sup>2</sup> But Aristotle's popularity is not limited to ethics. In philosophy of mind, for example, Hilary Putnam and Kathleen Wilkes have praised him as the first functionalist.<sup>3</sup> Such respect has been good for recent philosophy, which has taken new directions thanks to Aristotelian insights; it has also been good, in some ways, for Aristotelian scholarship, which seems to grow with each year. But popularity comes with a cost. In order to preserve it, commentators are sometimes tempted to downplay doctrines that we no longer find congenial.

This is not always detrimental to the understanding of Aristotle. For example, he famously believed that there were natural slaves,<sup>4</sup> not to mention that women were deformed men,<sup>5</sup> and Aristotelian apologists have argued—persuasively, in fact—that these views are in conflict with his own deeper commitments in biology and metaphysics.<sup>6</sup> By making Aristotle *au courant*, in other words, commentators can sometimes save Aristotle from himself. Whether his offensive views can be bowdlerized while leaving his ethics and politics intact is a fascinating question, though not our object here. Instead, we shall investigate two Aristotelian views that are less offensive than strange. One is about the

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Hursthouse 2002 and Crisp and Slote 1997.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Nussbaum 2000:5, and 1999:40.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Putnam 1975, or Wilkes 1992, which we shall examine below.

<sup>4</sup> *Pol.* 1.4–8.

<sup>5</sup> *Gen an.* 737a28.

<sup>6</sup> MacIntyre 1988:104–105.

nature of our selves, a second concerns our ideal life. According to the first, we are most of all pure thought; according to the second, we must also strive to purify this thought—to become, in fact, divine. For God, writes Aristotle, is pure thought: *noēsis noēseōs noēsis*, “thinking...thinking of thinking.”<sup>7</sup>

Many readers of Aristotle ignore these strange views;<sup>8</sup> some acknowledge their presence, only to dismiss them as inconsistent with his broader philosophical project. Wilkes and Nussbaum, for instance, have argued that these views are in conflict with Aristotle’s own deeper commitments in psychology, on the one hand, and ethics, on the other. To my mind, however, these views should be neither ignored nor dismissed: they are central to Aristotle’s philosophy. We shall begin by considering the two passages in which they are most explicit—*De Anima* 3.5 and a sample of *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.6–8. After presenting these passages, I shall spend the bulk of my time explaining three things about them: their meaning, their inter-dependence, and their importance for Aristotle. Finally, I shall return to the arguments that Wilkes and Nussbaum adduce for dismissing them, evaluating their arguments in light of my synthetic interpretation of these passages. Rather than criticize two commentators, however, I aim to rescue a somewhat neglected but nonetheless fundamental notion of Aristotle’s philosophy—pure thought.

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<sup>7</sup> *Metaph.* 1074b35; trans. PLM. My interpretation of this strange claim, and of Aristotle’s theology more generally, would take too long to present here. If this gives the impression that I am providing an interpretation of *Hamlet* without saying anything about the Prince of Denmark, please consult ch. 4.4 of *Purity of Thought: Dualism and Divinization in Greek Philosophy*, which can be found under “Writing” at [www.unc.edu/~plmiller](http://www.unc.edu/~plmiller).

<sup>8</sup> For example, *Metaph.* 1074b35 is never mentioned in Terence Irwin’s sophisticated study, *Aristotle’s First Principles*, which aspires “to give the uninitiated reader some idea of the main questions” of Aristotle’s philosophy (Irwin 1988:vii). There will not be space enough in this paper to present Aristotle’s theology and its importance for his psychology and ethics. The interpretation developed in this paper, however, does make *Metaphysics* Lambda’s description of God a linch-pin of Aristotle’s practical philosophy. As such, it agrees with Mary Louise Gill’s recent assessment of Aristotelian scholarship (Gill 2005:246). After surveying the metaphysical questions that currently preoccupy commentators on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, Gill conjectures that “the time is ripe to reconsider the relation between Lambda and the rest of the *Metaphysics*.”<sup>8</sup> Gill concludes that “there may be various ways to show that *Metaphysics* Lambda is, after all, the very book we were waiting for.”<sup>8</sup> My interpretation does not pretend to solve the difficult problems of Aristotle’s most difficult treatise, but it does follow Gill’s lead, placing Lambda at the center of Aristotle’s philosophy, especially its practical injunctions.

## 1. Aristotle's Thought Domesticated

Aristotle famously characterizes the soul as “the first actuality of a natural body which potentially has life,”<sup>9</sup> encouraging commentators to understand his psychology as a kind of naturalism, materialism, or physicalism. To be the first actuality of a natural body is simply to be the form of that body, so the Aristotelian soul is not some separate non physical element, as in Descartes. Wilkes has thus celebrated Aristotle “as every physicalist’s ideal role-model.”<sup>10</sup> She has accordingly been scandalized by the following, equally famous, passage (*De Anima* 3.5):

Since in every class of things, as in nature as a whole, we find two factors involved, a matter which is potentially all the particulars included in the class, and a cause which is productive in the sense that it makes them all (the latter standing to the former, as e.g. an art to its material), these distinct elements must likewise be found within the soul. And in fact *thought* [nous], as we have described it, is what it is by virtue of becoming all things, while there is another which is what it is by virtue of making all things: this is a sort of positive state like light; for in a sense light makes potential colors into actual colors. *Thought in this sense of it is separable, unaffected, unmixed, since it is in its essential nature activity* (for always the active is superior to the passive factor, the originating force to the matter). Actual knowledge is identical with its object: in the individual, potential knowledge is in time prior to actual knowledge, but absolutely it is not prior even in time. *It does not sometimes think and sometimes not think. When separated it is alone just what it is, and this alone is immortal and eternal* (we do not remember because, while this is unaffected, passive thought is perishable); and without this nothing thinks.<sup>11</sup>

There are two elements of *nous*, Aristotle confidently declares here. One is passive, becoming all things; another active, making all things. I shall try to make this strange distinction clearer in due course. For now, notice that the active element of *nous* is separable. Scandal arises for Wilkes because with this claim Aristotle “seems to put himself very resoundingly in the dualists’ camp.”<sup>12</sup> In what she titles a “Final

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<sup>9</sup> *De an.* 412a26–27; trans. Lawson-Tancred 1986:157. *Infra* note 23.

<sup>10</sup> Wilkes 1992:125.

<sup>11</sup> *De an.* 430a10–26; slightly rev. from trans. J. A. Smith, in Barnes 1995:684.

<sup>12</sup> Wilkes 1992:125.

Embarrassing Postscript” to her attempt to rehabilitate Aristotle’s psychology as physicalist, Wilkes tries to distance Aristotle’s version of dualism from the versions advanced in modern philosophy of mind. “I have to say,” she nonetheless admits, “I wish he had never written this chapter.”<sup>13</sup>

Nussbaum has been similarly embarrassed by *Nicomachean Ethics* (EN) 10.6–8. In these three chapters, too long to quote in full, Aristotle renews the investigation of happiness with which he began the treatise. In earlier books he seems to propose an ‘inclusive’ view of happiness, according to which the best life for humans involves different activities, of which philosophical thought is only one. “Wisdom,” he writes in the sixth book, is “a part of virtue as a whole.”<sup>14</sup> In this later treatment of the same subject, however, he appears to speak in favor of an ‘exclusive’ view. Happiest of all, he thus writes in the tenth book, is “the life according to *nous*.”<sup>15</sup> Here is the passage in which his exclusive view is most explicit:

So if among excellent actions political and military actions are distinguished by nobility and greatness, and these are un-leisurely and aim at an end and are not desirable for their own sake, but *the activity of intellect* [nous], which is contemplative, seems both to be superior in worth and to aim at no end beyond itself, and to have its pleasure proper to itself (and this augments the activity), and the self-sufficiency, leisureliness, un-weariedness (so far as this is possible for man), and all the other attributes ascribed to the blessed man are evidently those connected with this activity, it follows that this *will be the complete happiness of man*, if it be allowed a complete term of life (for none of the attributes of happiness is *incomplete*). *But such a life would be too high for man; for it is not in so far as he is man that he will live so, but in so far as something divine is present in him; and by so much as this is superior to our composite nature is its activity superior to that which is the exercise of the other kind of excellence. If nous is divine, then, in comparison with man, the life according to it is divine in comparison with human life. But we must not follow those who advise us being men, to think human things, and being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to*

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Eth. nic.* 1144a5; trans. PLM. Nussbaum discusses this and other such passages (2001:375–376. *Infra* notes 121 and 122.

<sup>15</sup> *Eth. nic.* 1178a7–8.

*live in accordance with the best thing in us; for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything.*<sup>16</sup>

According to Nussbaum, “these chapters do not fit into the argument of the *EN*.”<sup>17</sup> Adducing several passages from earlier in this treatise, as well as from other works,<sup>18</sup> she argues that “for the most part he articulates a conception of life complexly devoted to politics, love, and reflection.”<sup>19</sup> These apparently incongruous later chapters, she adds, even “represent a line of ethical thought that Aristotle elsewhere vigorously attacks.”<sup>20</sup> Nussbaum accurately calls this line of ethical thought ‘Platonic,’ but believes that Aristotle, whether in devotion to his teacher or to the allure of the exclusively contemplative life, advanced it without “attempting to harmonize it with the other view.”<sup>21</sup> And Nussbaum is not alone in her suspicion of these chapters and their exclusive view of happiness. Julia Annas believes that these two views were assembled into one work not by Aristotle himself but by his Hellenistic editor, Andronicus.<sup>22</sup> By showing their consistency, then, we can help defend the integrity of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. By showing the importance of this Platonic line of thought to Aristotle, moreover, we can perhaps understand better the deeper motivations of his practical philosophy.

## **2. Aristotle’s Human Thought**

Aristotle’s characterization of the soul as “the first actuality of a natural body which potentially has life”<sup>23</sup> exploits the distinction between different levels of potentiality and

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<sup>16</sup> *Eth. nic.* 1177b18–1178a1; slightly rev. from trans. Ross, rev. Urmson, in Barnes 1995:1861.

<sup>17</sup> Nussbaum 2001:377.

<sup>18</sup> Nussbaum 2001:375–376.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Nussbaum 2001:377.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Annas 1993:216, n. 1. Even if Aristotle wrote these views at different times, however, our curiosity about their harmony is not misplaced. He was a systematic thinker, perhaps the most systematic of all time. Our effort to harmonize even his apparently discordant thoughts should not cease, consequently, until we have satisfied ourselves that they are truly discordant and the fault is not instead with our superficial understanding of them. See also Annas 1999:52, n. 4.

<sup>23</sup> *De an.* 412a26–27; trans. Lawson-Tancred 1986:157. *Supra* note 9.

actuality that he introduces shortly before. “There are two ways in which actuality is spoken of,” he writes, and the difference between them is made clear by the case of knowledge.<sup>24</sup> The presence of knowledge—knowledge of the nature of a mollusc, for instance—presupposes a learner who is able to possess such knowledge. Before he learns the mollusc’s nature, then, he must be able to do so; in this state, he possesses this knowledge as a basic, or first, potentiality. After the learner has learned the mollusc’s nature, next, he possesses it as an actuality. But there is still something potential about this knowledge, since he may not be exercising it or contemplating it at the moment. This intermediate level of knowledge—actual possession without current contemplation—Aristotle describes as, simultaneously, a first actuality and a second potentiality. Once the knower is actively contemplating mollusc nature, his knowledge finally achieves second actuality.<sup>25</sup>

When Aristotle characterizes the soul as no more than a first actuality of the body, then, he does so because the soul is present even while the ensouled body is sleeping and not exercising many of its capacities. When it awakes, actualizing some of these potentialities, it then assumes a second actuality. Nor does actualization of a body, especially a human one, need to stop here, as Aristotle recognizes.<sup>26</sup> When a human body is awake, and sustaining itself by its nourishment, many of its potentialities remain to be actualized: some of those it shares with plants (growth, and reproduction); those it shares with other animals (perceiving, imagining, desiring, and moving); and that which is unique to itself in the natural world—thinking. The soul is thus a first actuality, but also a second potentiality. Sleeping, it may awake; waking, it may perceive; perceiving, it may think. Pure thought marks the uppermost limit of the natural hierarchy, as we shall see, since disembodied *nous* is pure actuality and cannot, as a result, be actualized any further.

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<sup>24</sup> *De an.* 412a22–23; trans. Lawson-Tancred 1986:157.

<sup>25</sup> Aristotle’s fullest discussion of these stages of actualization can be found at *De an.* 416a22–417b2.

<sup>26</sup> *De an.* 2.2–3.

Consider an example of a thinker, say Theophrastus. When he begins his investigations of molluscs, his thought of molluscs is in first potentiality. He does not yet understand them, but by the mere possession of *nous*, which can actualize their intelligible form, he is able to do so. For after he has accumulated experience of molluscs, after he has stored up their sensible forms—images—in his memory, he can then extract the intelligible form of mollusc from these images by noting patterns in them, inducing universal generalizations about them, and then resolving any puzzles they present.<sup>27</sup> “The objects of thought,” Aristotle writes, “are in the sensible forms.”<sup>28</sup> They are there as potentialities which *nous* actualizes: “the faculty of thinking [*to noētikon*] then thinks the forms in the images.”<sup>29</sup> The object of thought in this case is the intelligible form of the mollusc—its nature, essence, or soul; soul, recall, is the *form* of an organic body—so that when Theophrastus has systematized these images and induced from them mollusc form, he will thereby understand its soul. Since thinking produces an identity between thinker and thought,<sup>30</sup> Theophrastus’s soul thus assumes the form of mollusc soul.<sup>31</sup>

The mollusc, for its part, has a soul before it becomes the object of research; as Aristotle has characterized it, this is the first actuality of mollusc body. Like other organisms, then, it can actualize itself more or less fully by engaging more or less in the characteristic activities potentially in this first actuality. But it cannot fully actualize itself, even as it aims to do just that. The intelligible form of the mollusc, its soul, requires the investigations of a biologist, Theophrastus, in order to actualize its nameless second

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<sup>27</sup> *An. post.* 100a4–9. Other relevant passages are cited in Gerson 2005:143, n. 42: *De an.* 417b22–23; *An. post.* 87b28–39; *Mot. an.* 698a11; *Phys.* 189a7; *Metaph.* 981a15–21, 1059b26, 1087a15–21.

<sup>28</sup> *De an.* 432a5; trans. Smith, in Barnes 1995:686.

<sup>29</sup> *De an.* 431b2; trans. Smith, in Barnes 1995:686.

<sup>30</sup> *De an.* 417b5–9. Supra note 11. Gerson 2005:151 cites six passages that make the same point, 430a4–5, 430a19–20, 430b25–26, 431a1, 431b17, 431b22–23. See also *Metaph.* 1072b20–23.

<sup>31</sup> Or almost. As we shall see, Theophrastus’s soul—as embodied *nous*—must think with images that are other than it. Consequently, its identification with what is thought is qualified. “Unqualified identity,” writes Gerson, “is available only for that which is cognitively identical with that which is not other than it” (Gerson 2005:157).

potentiality to be thought.<sup>32</sup> Neither the thought nor the form with which it is identified, however, achieves its full, second actuality unless Theophrastus is currently contemplating mollusc form. After all, his research has brought his thought of this form out of first potentiality into first actuality, but without thinking of it at the moment, this thought remains in second potentiality, as does the form with which it is identified. In order that this form may be fully actualized, and in order that Theophrastus may fully actualize his thought about it—in order, in short, that there may be thinking of molluscs—something must activate both the second potentiality in the form to be thought and the second potentiality in *nous* to think of it.

This activator is active *nous*, but we appear no closer to understanding it until we notice how Aristotle characterizes the levels of thought's actualization in the following passage:

When *nous* has [2] become each thing in the way in which a man who actually knows is said to do so (this happens when he is now able to exercise the power on his own initiative), its condition is still one of potentiality, but in a different sense from [1] the potentiality which preceded the acquisition of knowledge by learning or discovery; and *nous* is then able [3] to think itself.<sup>33</sup>

The inserted numbers designate these levels: [1] is first potentiality; [2] first actuality and second potentiality; [3] second actuality. In the example of Theophrastus, [1] is his ignorance, [2] the point at which his *nous* has assumed the form of mollusc. But this in-formed *nous*—passive *nous*—remains in second potentiality, just as the mollusc soul whose form it had become remained in second potentiality, until it too becomes the object of thought. To make this in-formed passive *nous* the object of thought, we might posit

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<sup>32</sup> Just as there was neither a Greek nor an English word to signify the second actuality of the sensible form red, so too there is no word to signify the second actuality of the intelligible form mollusc, or for that matter of any other intelligible form. Despite its enormous influence on subsequent philosophy, Aristotle's teleology never seems to have influenced a culture so much as to encourage a coinage to express efficiently these second actualities.

<sup>33</sup> *De an.* 429b6–9; slightly rev. from trans. Smith, in Barnes 1995:682–683.

another *nous*—a distinct, active *nous*—but this would achieve nothing except the beginning of an infinite regress. For once active *nous* had thought of in-formed passive *nous*, it too would remain a second potentiality to be thought until a super-active *nous* should think of it. The only way to stop this regress, then, is to have *nous* think itself, and this is precisely what Aristotle says in [3]. Thus, although Aristotle’s distinction among levels of potentiality and actuality encourages us to analyze this self-contemplation into thinker (so-called active *nous*) and thought (passive *nous*), his theory of thinking, his insistence that “what thinks and what is thought are identical,”<sup>34</sup> requires that in fact they are the same thing in reality—*nous* undivided—even if they differ in being (*einai*), rather like the road up and the road down differing despite their identity.<sup>35</sup>

### 3. Disembodied Thought

If *nous* is to achieve this self-contemplation, it must be incorporeal. The Neoplatonic commentators Philoponus and Pseudo-Philoponus both make the point,<sup>36</sup> which Gerson condenses by stating the impossibility of corporeal self-reflexivity:

If the putative bodily cognizer is in a state of information, then the grasp of that state will, *ex hypothesi*, be a bodily state. One bodily state grasping the state of another body will not be a case of the cognizer ‘thinking itself.’ It will be a case of one cognizer grasping the state of another cognizer.<sup>37</sup>

A materialist could object that one part of the body may grasp the state of another part of the body, and that, inasmuch as they are parts of the same body, this body of which they

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<sup>34</sup> *De an.* 430a4–5. Supra note 30. As already mentioned (supra note 31), but not yet explained, this identity must remain qualified so long as *nous* is embodied (Gerson 2005:157).

<sup>35</sup> What can this odd expression mean: *identical but distinct in being*? Aristotle typically uses it, as Gerson observes, “to indicate that there is one reality that can be variously defined, such as the road that can be defined according to opposite directions.” (Gerson 2005:147. The example is borrowed from Heraclitus [DK 22B59])

<sup>36</sup> Gerson 2005:150 provides ample citations..

<sup>37</sup> Gerson 2005:150.

are parts cognizes itself. A thermostat would provide a primitive example.<sup>38</sup> Whatever the success of this objection outside of the Aristotelian idiom, however, it is incoherent within it. Since thinking creates an identity between that which thinks and that which is thought,<sup>39</sup> the ‘parts’ of the self-contemplator cannot be different, as their designation as ‘parts’ so evidently makes them out to be. By contrast, as we have seen, when incorporeal *nous* becomes intelligible form, and is necessarily aware of itself doing so, its passivity and activity are one. Passive and active *nous* differ in being (*einai*)—inasmuch as psychologists can analyze them, exactly as we have done here—but they are really identical.

There is only one *nous*, and it is no more pure potentiality than it is pure actuality—at least while it is embodied. For while it is in an ensouled body, it may be used by a soul to access the intelligible forms, but only through images. “No one can learn or understand anything in the absence of sense,” Aristotle therefore writes of embodied thought, “and when the mind is actively aware [*theōrein*] of anything it is necessarily aware of it along with an image.”<sup>40</sup> The presence of images in embodied thought, however, compromises its actuality. To begin with, these images are only *potentially* intelligible forms, so the extraction of these forms from them is an effort, a movement from potentiality to actuality.<sup>41</sup> But the actuality is never fully reached, since the images are never fully purged.

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<sup>38</sup> A modern materialist attempt to account for falsity, or misrepresentation, along these lines can be found in Dretske 1986. On the subject of modern applications of these Aristotelian ideas, something like the requirement of self-awareness may be found in Searle’s (1980) objections to functionalist philosophy of mind.

<sup>39</sup> Aside from the six passages of *De an.* already cited, there are these two from *Metaph.*: 1072b20–22, 1074b38–1075a5. The identity here spoken of must remain qualified, since it relies on images, whose intercession keeps the identity from being unqualified (Gerson 2005:157). This distinction will be explained shortly.

<sup>40</sup> *De an.* 432a7–10; trans. Smith, in Barnes 1995:687. *Theōrein* connoted vision as well as thought, making ‘contemplation’ an especially apt translation of *theōria*.

<sup>41</sup> To be clear, Aristotle insists that “the original acquisition of knowledge is not a becoming [*genesis*] or an alteration [*alloiōsis*]; for we are said to know and to understand when our intellect has reached a state of rest and come to a standstill, and there is no becoming that leads to a state of rest” (*Phys.* 247b10–12; trans. Hardie and Gaye, in Barnes 1995:414; see also *De an.* 407a32–33 and *Phys.* 210a10–11). The analogy Aristotle uses to explain this point is very revealing: “just as when anyone has passed from a state of intoxication or sleep or disease to the contrary state, we do not say that he has become possessed of

As a result, the identity between embodied *nous* and its object of thought is never total.<sup>42</sup> It remains qualified by the lingering presence of images.<sup>43</sup>

Even after bringing one such form into qualified actuality through philosophical investigation, moreover, embodied *nous* must begin again with another. And if it is to keep the first form in full actuality it must remain in its active contemplation. As if this were not difficult enough, its efforts are of course compromised by the demands of the body, which interrupt its actualization of intelligible forms still in potentiality, not to mention its contemplation of ones already actualized. Some must therefore slip from its awareness, returning to potentiality, if only to emerge once again into actuality upon additional contemplation. The complexity of the world and the limits of embodiment thus hinder thinking with images from fully actualizing all intelligible form. Embodied thinking is consequently episodic.

Not so for the disembodied variety. “It does not sometimes think and sometimes not think.”<sup>44</sup> Disembodied *nous* always thinks. In order to be pure actuality, moreover, it must thereby think of itself. Finally, it must do so without images. The purity of this imageless thought permits it to achieve perfect, unqualified identity with its object.<sup>45</sup> Borrowing the very terms Plato used to distinguish the ultimate from the penultimate intellectual power,<sup>46</sup> Aristotle calls this imageless thought *noēsis* (pure thinking), and contrasts it with *dianoia* (discursive thought).<sup>47</sup> *Dianoia* must be embodied, since the

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knowledge again, in spite of the fact that he was previously incapable of using his knowledge” (*ibid.*). When someone becomes drunk or falls asleep, then, his knowledge remains but recedes into potentiality. When he sobers up or awakes, the knowledge returns to actuality. The same logic is at work in Aristotle’s account of *akrasia* in *Eth. nic.* 7.2–3, where people act incontinently when their knowledge of the particular premise of a moral syllogism has been rendered potential by strong feelings in a way similar to the potentiality of knowledge induced by intoxication or sleep.

<sup>42</sup> This imperfect identity is the Achilles’ heel of Aristotle’s psychology, since it reintroduces the infinite regress of self-contemplation which the perfect identity of thinker and thought was supposed to solve.

<sup>43</sup> Gerson 2005:157. *Supra* notes 31 and 39.

<sup>44</sup> *De an.* 430a22; trans. Smith, in Barnes 1995:684.

<sup>45</sup> Gerson 2005:157.

<sup>46</sup> *Resp.* 533d–e.

<sup>47</sup> *De an.* 430a27 and *De an.* 427b13 (*dianoieisthai*) respectively.

images it uses to access intelligible forms are, for their part, actualizations of both the sense faculty and the bodily sense organs with which this faculty is identical.<sup>48</sup> *Noēsis*, however, dispenses with images in its contemplation—but only when separate from the body: “when separated it is alone just what it is.”<sup>49</sup> Otherwise its actuality is compromised, as we have seen, by mixture with potentiality. Free from association with the body and its images, by contrast, *nous* “is in its essential nature activity.”<sup>50</sup> In this state of pure actuality, Aristotle adds, *nous* is “immortal and eternal.”<sup>51</sup>

This conclusion presents a puzzle for the unitary picture of *nous* I have been championing, since Aristotle states clearly that “passive *nous* is perishable.”<sup>52</sup> For if passive *nous* is perishable, it would appear to be something distinct from the *nous* that is immortal and eternal, not to mention divine.<sup>53</sup> But this puzzling appearance can be dispelled by recalling the analogy of Plato that best expresses his own understanding of *nous* and the program of its purification this understanding underwrites: the sea-god Glaucus.

Although a divinity in truth, writes Plato, Glaucus has his radiance dimmed here below by “the shells, seaweeds, and rocks,” that “have grown into him.”<sup>54</sup> So likewise for our divine reason, according to Plato. In this life its natural radiance is dimmed by the appetite and ambition that, thanks to its embodiment, encrust it. Epistemically, this means that it must think discursively, using representations. Ironically, Plato’s presentation of these very images—of Glaucus, along with all the other indelible images of *Republic*—exemplifies embodied thought. “The effort to employ images to convey the truth about images themselves and what they represent,” writes Gerson paradoxically, “is the

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<sup>48</sup> Albeit different in being (*einai*): *De an.* 424a24–25.

<sup>49</sup> *De an.* 430a23; trans. Smith, in Barnes 1995:684.

<sup>50</sup> *De an.* 430a17; trans. Smith, in Barnes 1995:684.

<sup>51</sup> *De an.* 430a24.

<sup>52</sup> *De an.* 430a25; slight rev. from trans. Smith, in Barnes 1995:684.

<sup>53</sup> *De an.* 413b25–27.

<sup>54</sup> *Resp.* 10.611d4–5; trans. Reeve 2004:316.

embodied philosopher's burden.<sup>55</sup> Dialectic seeks to purify us, however, by pushing us to think without such images, without even words or concepts. Plato's philosophical program encourages us to forego *dianoia* in favor of non-representational *noēsis*, a direct assimilation to the Forms, and ultimately to the Form of Forms, the Good. The goal of Platonic philosophy may therefore be characterized as the assimilation of the philosopher's thinking to this Good: the perfect purification of thought.

Aristotle's philosophical goal is remarkably similar. To begin with, his *nous* resembles the sea-god Glaucus: when embodied here below, it becomes encrusted with psychic elements that are alien to it. "*Nous* seems to be an independent substance implanted within us," writes Aristotle, "and to be incapable of being destroyed."<sup>56</sup> And yet when this "more divine and unaffected"<sup>57</sup> element is implanted within us, its power is compromised, "as occurs in drunkenness and disease."<sup>58</sup> With Plato, divine *nous* becomes encrusted with the appetites and ambition, as well as the lower cognitive powers they favor (imagination, faith, and even discursive thinking). With Aristotle, the excrescences include not only the soul's plant and animal capacities—such as nutrition, generation, desire, perception, and imagination—but also passive *nous*. In other words, when *nous* is "unmixed" with body, it is "unaffected," thinking continuously, fully, and directly of all intelligible forms, as well as of itself.<sup>59</sup>

When *nous* is embodied, by contrast, its mixture with the body introduces potentiality into it, compromising the continuity, fullness, and immediacy of its thought, forcing it to access intelligible forms through the images it receives from perception, and thereby introducing potentiality and interruptions into its operation. The Aristotelian

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<sup>55</sup> Gerson 2003:145.

<sup>56</sup> *De an.* 408b17–18; slightly rev. from trans. Smith, in Barnes 1995:651.

<sup>57</sup> *De an.* 408b30–31; slight rev. from trans. Smith, in Barnes 1995:651.

<sup>58</sup> *De an.* 408b23; trans. Smith, in Barnes 1995:651. Drunkenness and disturbed bodily conditions like diseases are, not coincidentally, the very states Aristotle uses to explain *akrasia*, weakness-of-will (*EN* 7.3, but especially 1147b7).

<sup>59</sup> *De an.* 430a22–26.

philosopher nonetheless works with these images to actualize the intelligible forms potentially within them. By doing so he at least identifies with the activity of pure *nous*, even if he cannot become pure *nous* while embodied. Nevertheless, following Plato in *Phaedo*, and ultimately the Pythagorean Philolaus, he should consider this work, the work of philosophy, preparation for death.<sup>60</sup> For when he dies, his *nous* will be liberated from its bodily incarceration.<sup>61</sup> It will be assumed into the self-contemplation that is God.

#### 4. Aristotle's Inhuman Thought

Since "*nous* seems to be an independent substance implanted within us,"<sup>62</sup> one whose pure contemplation is compromised by this implantation in the particular ways we have examined, it is hardly surprising that "the union must be for it undesirable."<sup>63</sup> While embodied, however, it becomes the highest part of the human soul, so that the whole soul by nature serves its end. "All men by nature desire to know."<sup>64</sup> At least when it is functioning well, in other words, the soul puts its capacities in the service of *nous*. But serving by nature the end of an independent substance, such a soul cannot be an integral substance, at least not in the same sense in which *nous* is one.<sup>65</sup> For "definition and essence in the primary and simple sense," says Aristotle, "belong to substances."<sup>66</sup> Since the human soul strives by nature to know, then, its definition will refer to reason: "the function of *anthrōpos*," famously, "is activity of the soul according to reason (*logos*)."<sup>67</sup> The definition of reason, by contrast, need never mention the rest of the soul. "Only when it has

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<sup>60</sup> *Phaed.* 64a4–6, 80e7–81a2.

<sup>61</sup> Philolaus wrote "that the soul has been yoked to the body as a punishment and that it is buried in it as though in a tomb" (Clement, *Strom.* III iii 17.1 DK 44B14; trans. Barnes 2001:181).

<sup>62</sup> *Supra* note 57.

<sup>63</sup> *De an.* 407b6; trans. Smith, in Barnes 1995:649.

<sup>64</sup> *Metaph.* 980a22; trans. Ross, in Barnes 1995:1552.

<sup>65</sup> *Metaph.* 1029b24–1030a18. See also *Cat.* 2a13–14, 2b9–11, and 3b10–12. "We must deny that Human is strictly speaking a substance," writes Reeve, adding that "for the same reason, he does not have either an essence or a definition in the strict sense in which only a substance has these things" (Reeve 2000:188).

<sup>66</sup> *Metaph.* 1030b4–5; trans. Ross, in Barnes 1995:1627.

<sup>67</sup> *Eth. nic.* 1098a14; trans. PLM. See

been separated,” after all, is *nous* “precisely what it is.”<sup>68</sup> While it is embodied, however, “this would seem, too, to be each man himself, since it is the supreme and better part of him.”<sup>69</sup> As a result, writes Aristotle, “*nous* most of all (*malista*) is man.”<sup>70</sup>

We are most of all divine *nous*, but not purely.<sup>71</sup> Encumbered for now by a body and the inferior capacities of a human soul, our end is nonetheless the end of *nous*: to contemplate. Were it disembodied, our *nous* would contemplate intelligible forms immediately; for now, we must access them through images. Undaunted, the Aristotelian philosopher works with these images to actualize the intelligible forms potentially within them. Beginning with the essences embodied in other organisms—“their greater nearness and affinity to us balances somewhat the loftier interest of the heavenly things that are the objects of higher philosophy”<sup>72</sup>—this philosopher seeks to assimilate the formal structure of the natural world. But by themselves his natural sciences remain incomplete, for at least three reasons.

They investigate only embodied beings, first of all, leaving out beings who lack terrestrial matter. The study of nature, then, leads the Aristotelian philosopher into astronomy and psychology, studying the immaterial movers of the heavens and of the soul.<sup>73</sup> As a second shortcoming, the natural sciences “cut off a part of being and investigate the attributes of this part.”<sup>74</sup> For instance, biology studies what is unique to molluscs, among other organisms, but never what molluscs and the other organisms share with all beings insofar as they are beings. “First philosophy”<sup>75</sup> will thus be required, “a science that investigates being as being,”<sup>76</sup> a science that deals “with the first causes and

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<sup>68</sup> *De an.* 430a23; trans. Irwin and Fine 1995:202.

<sup>69</sup> *Supra* note 70.

<sup>70</sup> *Eth. nic.* 1178a1–8; slightly rev. from trans. Ross, rev. Urmson, in Barnes 1995:1861; cited in Reeve 2000:184.

<sup>71</sup> *Nous* is called “divine” at *Gen. an.* 736b27–28.

<sup>72</sup> *Part. an.* 645a3–4; trans. Ogle, in Barnes 1995:1004.

<sup>73</sup> *Metaph.* 1026a10–14, 1073a33–35. *De an.* 408a15–17.

<sup>74</sup> *Metaph.* 1003a25; trans. Ross, in Barnes 1995:1584.

<sup>75</sup> *Metaph.* 1004a4. For the outlines of this science, see *Metaph.* 4.1–2.

<sup>76</sup> *Metaph.* 1003a21; trans. Ross, in Barnes 1995:1584.

the principles [*archai*] of things.”<sup>77</sup> According to Aristotle, “that cause is the first which we call that for the sake of which,” the final cause, “for this is the account [*logos*] of the thing, and the account forms the starting point [*archē*].”<sup>78</sup> The natural sciences may study proximate ends, but their third shortcoming—a result of their first and second—is that they stop far short of the final cause of everything. By contrast, “the science which knows to what end each thing must be done,” the science, in other words, of the final cause, “is the most authoritative of the sciences.”<sup>79</sup> But the final cause of the whole cosmos—the highest actuality, in other words, of all its essences—is God. Accordingly, first philosophy is ultimately theology.<sup>80</sup>

For theology, God is not only the object of study; He is also its supreme practitioner.<sup>81</sup> Thinking of God, after all, is God’s essence. Imitating Him, we also may practice theology; indeed, it is our final cause to do so. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, thus, Aristotle enjoins above all “the activity of *nous*, which is contemplative,”<sup>82</sup> enumerating several criteria that exalt it above the practical life of warfare and politics.<sup>83</sup> Two of them are most pertinent to our investigation: the first because it makes explicit Aristotle’s Platonic division of the human being; the second because it describes the purest pleasure in Platonic terms, as the happiness of contemplation.

“*Nous* is the best thing in us,” says Aristotle, adding that “the objects of *nous* are the best knowable objects.”<sup>84</sup> Its activity, contemplation, must therefore be superior to the practical life because it is the activity of our best part, rather than of its compound with the body and the lower capacities of the soul.<sup>85</sup> When it is exercised upon the best objects,

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<sup>77</sup> *Metaph.* 981b29–30; trans. Ross, in Barnes 1995:1553.

<sup>78</sup> *Part. an.* 639b14–16; trans. Ogle, in Barnes 1995:995.

<sup>79</sup> *Metaph.* 982b5–6; trans. Ross, in Barnes 1995:1554.

<sup>80</sup> *Metaph.* 1026a18–20.

<sup>81</sup> *Metaph.* 982b29–983a10.

<sup>82</sup> *Eth. nic.* 1177b19; trans. Ross, rev. Urmson, in Barnes 1995:1861.

<sup>83</sup> Gerson 2005:253–254 lists seven such criteria, of which we shall overlook two (leisure and seriousness).

<sup>84</sup> *Eth. nic.* 1177a20–21. trans. Ross, rev. Urmson, in Barnes 1995:1860.

<sup>85</sup> *Eth. nic.* 1177b29.

furthermore, this activity must be best of all. These objects are essences or intelligible forms, to begin with, and so embodied *nous* starts by contemplating them. By doing so, however, it brings them to a higher level of actuality. In its pursuit of the highest explanation or cause, then, embodied *nous* must next contemplate itself. Contemplation thus becomes self-contemplation. And yet, despite its excellence, our *nous* is not the best of all objects; it is limited by its embodiment. Best of all is the final cause we share with the other intelligible forms: God. And so, first contemplating form, then contemplating ourselves, we end by contemplating God, who is but perfect self-contemplation.

“Philosophy,” writes Aristotle, “is thought to offer pleasures marvelous for their purity and enduringness.”<sup>86</sup> These pleasures endure longer than the pleasures of politics and warfare because philosophical activity is more continuous, complete, and self-sufficient. To these three criteria,<sup>87</sup> then, Aristotle adds purity, recalling Plato’s distinction between pleasures pure and impure. The philosopher, argued Plato, experiences the purest of all pleasures: the contemplation of Form.<sup>88</sup> Making the same claim, and implicitly the same distinction, Aristotle adapts them both to his own distinction between activities (*energeiai*) and movements (*kinēseis*).<sup>89</sup> Explaining this distinction elsewhere, he writes that “every movement (e.g., that of building) takes time and is for the sake of an end, and is complete when it has made what it aims at.”<sup>90</sup> The end of building a temple, for example, is a finished temple. “The fitting together of stones” is a step towards the actualization of this end, as is “the fluting of a column” and “the making of the base or of the triglyph,” but none of these steps is complete because individually they fall short of the end.<sup>91</sup> Each actualizes some of the potential in the materials at hand, but only some. Moreover, “they are different in kind” and take time. “In their parts and during the time

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<sup>86</sup> *Eth. nic.* 1177a25–26; trans. Ross, rev. Urmson, in Barnes 1995:1861.

<sup>87</sup> See *EN* 10.6–8 for discussions of these three criteria.

<sup>88</sup> *Resp.* 9.583b1–588a8.

<sup>89</sup> For a full analysis and defense of the distinction, see Reeve 2000:137–147.

<sup>90</sup> *Eth. nic.* 1174a19–21; trans. W. D. Ross, rev. J. O. Urmson, in Barnes 1995:1856.

<sup>91</sup> *Eth. nic.* 1174a24–26; trans. Ross, rev. Urmson, in Barnes 1995:1856.

they occupy,” Aristotle adds, “all movements are incomplete, and are different in kind from the whole movement and from each other.”<sup>92</sup> Building is therefore a movement, in sum, because it is incomplete, heterogeneous, and divisible.

Activities, by contrast, prove to be complete, homogeneous, and indivisible. As examples of them, Aristotle chooses seeing and thinking.<sup>93</sup> “It is the same thing that at the same time has seen and is seeing,” he observes, “or is thinking [*noei*] and has thought [*nenoeēken*].”<sup>94</sup> Seeing has no distinguishable parts: each resembles the others, and they all possess at every instant the end of seeing, which is vision itself.<sup>95</sup> The same is true of pure thinking (*noein*), as we concluded in our independent discussion of its differences from discursive thinking (*dianoeisthai*). Homogeneous, indivisible, and complete, thinking could also be simple as well as eternal. As such, contemplation imitates the pure activity of God. After all, contemplation, and more specifically self-contemplation, is the pure activity of God.<sup>96</sup>

Pleasure is similarly an activity, Aristotle argues, and thus neither a movement nor its end.<sup>97</sup> As a result, its purity depends on the superiority of its activity. “While there is pleasure in respect of any sense, and in respect of thought and contemplation no less,” says Aristotle, “the most complete is pleasantest, and that of a well-conditioned organ in relation to the worthiest of its objects is the most complete.”<sup>98</sup> *Nous* is not only our best organ, Aristotle has called it divine.<sup>99</sup> Its best condition is disembodiment, when “it is alone just what it is.”<sup>100</sup> For only “when separated,” as we have seen, is it “unaffected,

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<sup>92</sup> *Eth. nic.* 1174a22–23; trans. W. D. Ross, rev. J. O. Urmson, in Barnes 1995:1856.

<sup>93</sup> *Metaph.* 1048b23–24.

<sup>94</sup> *Metaph.* 1048b33–34; trans. Ross, in Barnes 1995:1656.

<sup>95</sup> This is not to say that seeing cannot be used for ulterior ends, such as learning. But Aristotle distinguishes between *internal* and *external* ends (*Eth. nic.* 1094a3–5), and here intends internal ones.

<sup>96</sup> See also *Cael.* 286a9–10.

<sup>97</sup> *Eth. nic.* 1174a13–1174b14.

<sup>98</sup> *Eth. nic.* 1174b20–23; trans. Ross, rev. Urmson, in Barnes 1995:1857.

<sup>99</sup> *Supra* note 71; cited in Reeve 2000:161.

<sup>100</sup> *Supra* notes 49 and 68; *De an.* 430a23–24; trans. Smith, in Barnes 1995:684.

unmixed, since in its essential nature it is activity,” like God Himself.<sup>101</sup> In this best condition, which is none other than death, our essential activity contemplates most purely the worthiest of its objects, which is none other than God. In death, then, our purely active *nous* contemplates purely active *nous*. “What thinks and what is thought,” however, “are identical.”<sup>102</sup> By dying, it would thus seem, we *become* the self-contemplation of God.

In life, the most pleasant activity is still that of the best organ in relation to the best object. Even for embodied *nous*, the most pleasant activity remains theology. “This life therefore is also the happiest.”<sup>103</sup> But its happiness transcends that available to humanity. “Such a life would be too high for man,” objects Aristotle, “for it is not in so far as he is man that he will live so, but in so far as something divine is present in him.”<sup>104</sup> Man is doubly composite: of soul and body, at one level, of *nous* and the lower capacities of the soul, at another. It is not as a composite of either type that he theologizes, however, but as *nous* alone. “By so much as this is superior to our composite nature,” says Aristotle accordingly, “is its activity superior to that which is the exercise of the other kind of excellence,” namely excellence of the practical life.<sup>105</sup> When we live the contemplative life, then, we do not live a human life, properly speaking, but instead one that is divine. We may now return to the passage of the *Nicomachean Ethics* with which we began (*Eth. nic.* 1177b18–1178a1), prepared to understand the full depth of its injunction.

Contemplation of God is our end, so if we wish to be most happy we must pursue it. And yet theology requires disregarding our humanity. Taken to its extreme, after all, theology requires becoming identical to God. But we cannot achieve this extreme until death. Despite straining every nerve while embodied, we remain distinct from Him. Because our bodies mix potentiality into the activity of pure *nous*, our thought’s identity

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<sup>101</sup> Supra note 11: *De an.* 430a17–18; slightly rev. from trans. Smith, in Barnes 1995:684.

<sup>102</sup> Supra notes 34 and **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

<sup>103</sup> *Eth. nic.* 1178a8; trans. Ross, rev. Urmson, in Barnes 1995:1862.

<sup>104</sup> *Eth. nic.* 1177b27–28; trans. Ross, rev. Urmson, in Barnes 1995:1861.

<sup>105</sup> *Eth. nic.* 1177b28–30; trans. Ross, rev. Urmson, in Barnes 1995:1861.

with its object must remain qualified. Only purely active *nous* achieves an identity that is unqualified. Only death promises liberation from this bodily prison.<sup>106</sup> Aristotle never uses this Pythagorean, and later Platonic, idiom, but one goal of this paper has been to show that he nonetheless inherits the ideas to which it gave expression: that the human being is a divine spark mixed with base matter, that the goal of ethics is to purify this spark by philosophical contemplation of the divine, and that the result of this contemplation is the divinization of the philosopher, if only in death.

### 5. Aristotle's Thought Estranged

A fuller examination of Aristotle's *corpus* might show this program of purification and divinization animating his other philosophical investigations. In such a short discussion as this one, however, we have argued only that it illuminates the most difficult passages of Aristotle's psychology and ethics (*De Anima* 3.5 and *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.6–8). Let us conclude by returning to the problems which Wilkes and Nussbaum attributed to these passages, submitting their reasoning to the critique that our elucidation of this program now affords us.

Since Aristotle defines the soul as a form, for which the natural body is matter,<sup>107</sup> Wilkes rejects the dualism evident in *DA* 3.5 because “it would license too much.”<sup>108</sup> Grass has a form—and thus a soul—no less than humans do. “We would have to admit dualism for grass,” quips Wilkes, “just as much as for Greeks.”<sup>109</sup> But the separable and immortal element of the human hybrid, purely active *nous*, is immaterial not because it is a form, as Wilkes assumes, but because its contemplation is perfect self-contemplation. This is impossible for material beings, as we have seen, because only the immaterial can achieve perfect identity of contemplator and contemplated. Wilkes overlooks this point, it would

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<sup>106</sup> Supra note 61.

<sup>107</sup> *De an.* 412a26–27. Supra note 9.

<sup>108</sup> Wilkes 1992:113.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

seem, because she finds it “hard to understand Aristotle’s insistence that perceiving and thinking is a matter of ‘receiving the form’ and becoming ‘identical with its object.’”<sup>110</sup> Wilkes is not alone. Aristotle’s epistemology has been hard for many recent philosophers to appreciate.

“A non-representationalist account of knowledge,” writes Gerson, “holds that knowledge is a state in part constituted by the knowable, not merely caused by it.”<sup>111</sup> Such a state is not readily understood by us in the wake of the scientific revolution, which provoked philosophers to develop the representationalist epistemologies that have dominated the field ever since.<sup>112</sup> According to them, as Richard Rorty has argued, the mind is like a mirror, whose knowledge is an *image* or *representation* of reality. To Plato and Aristotle, by contrast, the mind is more like a sponge, whose knowledge is an *assimilation* or *reception* of reality.<sup>113</sup> This reception of reality makes pure thinking—the highest form of knowledge—partially constituted by the knowable, the way a sponge is partially constituted by the water it has absorbed. Aristotle’s non-representational epistemology thus becomes the linch-pin, as we have seen, not only of his psychology, but also of his ethics. For the goal of human life is to achieve knowledge of God, which is to say (a qualified) identity with him.

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<sup>110</sup> Wilkes 1992:126.

<sup>111</sup> Gerson 2003:82.

<sup>112</sup> Since color, for instance, is a so-called secondary quality, a quality that objects and their atoms produce in minds, but which objects themselves do not have, our knowledge of color cannot be the reception of the object’s own form, its primary qualities. The two figures who founded the representationalist tradition, according to Richard Rorty’s (1981) discussion and criticism of it, are Descartes, who introduces the metaphor of the mind as a mirror, and Locke, who portrays knowledge as accurate representations (or *ideas*) in the mirror. Rejecting ancient and medieval non-representationalist epistemologies, as well as the modern representationalist ones that are the target of his book, Rorty champions instead the post-modern, or ‘pragmatist,’ epistemologies he finds in the likes of Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey. See also Gerson 2003:81–82.

<sup>113</sup> Gerson 2003, ch. 2, adduces independent arguments for the plausibility of a non-representationalist epistemology. “One excellent reason for holding that knowledge is non-representational,” he writes, “is that knowledge is an infallible state” (2003:82). “If knowledge were representational,” he adds, “infallibility could in principle not be preserved because there would be no way of inferring from a representational state any objective state of affairs” (*ibid.*).

Despite her misunderstanding of Aristotle’s epistemology and the dualism it produces, Wilkes concludes her “Final Embarrassed Postscript” about it with two insightful comments. First of all, she writes, “the problem of understanding *EN* 10.6–10, and that of understanding *DA* 3.5, are two sides of the same coin.”<sup>114</sup> This is precisely what we have found in our exposition of the program of purification and divinization that animates both. Wilkes does not notice this program, but she does observe correctly that “Aristotle’s version of immortality is more like that of Heraclitus than that of contemporary Christianity.”<sup>115</sup> For according to Aristotle, when we survive bodily death, we do so not as humans, but as something else, something like the divine spark which Heraclitus described as returning to the cosmic fire.<sup>116</sup> So much Wilkes has right. She goes astray, at least as a scholar of Aristotle, when she objects that on his view of immortality “we (you, I, Heraclitus) do not survive as ourselves, but something else does: the Heraclitean fire, or the Aristotelian light of the intellect.”<sup>117</sup> To Aristotle, we are this light of the intellect, not the human hybrids in which for a certain time we are doomed to wander the earth.

Unlike Wilkes, Nussbaum demonstrates an awareness of Aristotle’s broad commitment to this Platonic and Pythagorean program, citing passages from throughout the *corpus* that signal its importance to him.<sup>118</sup> She nevertheless offers several reasons to downplay it, claiming that it is “at odds with the general anthropocentrism of Aristotle’s ethical method.”<sup>119</sup> But if we are not really *anthrōpoi*, according to Aristotle, we should not expect his ethical method to be anthropocentric. Each of Nussbaum’s arguments is designed to render Aristotle’s expression of the Platonic program inconsistent with his other ethical commitments. But each of these arguments ignores Aristotle’s assertion that

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<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> See, e.g., DK 22B30, 36, 76a.

<sup>117</sup> Wilkes 1992:126.

<sup>118</sup> Nussbaum cites *Cael.* 2.12, *Part. an.* 1.5, *Eth. nic.* 1141a20–22, *Metaph.* 12, and *Pol.* 1 (2001:373–374).

<sup>119</sup> Nussbaum 2001:373.

“we are most of all our *nous*.”<sup>120</sup> Let us conclude by scrutinizing Nussbaum’s three best arguments.

First of all, she writes, in his minor moral works (*Eudemian Ethics* and *Magna Moralia*), “Aristotle explicitly argues that *eudaimonia* is a composite of several parts,” only one of which is philosophical contemplation.<sup>121</sup> Although she provides no citations from these minor works, she does mention a passage from *Nicomachean Ethics* in which Aristotle says that wisdom (*sophia*) is “part of virtue as a whole.”<sup>122</sup> But in this passage, as in most of his ethical writings, Aristotle is speaking of *human* virtue and happiness, not the happiness and virtue of *nous*. And this is to be expected. After all, even if we are not human beings *really*, we still spend this life imprisoned in a body where we must at least cooperate with our captors, the elements that make us seem human.

Secondly, when Nussbaum reports that Aristotle considers friendship (*philia*) and the virtues of character to be choiceworthy for their own sake,<sup>123</sup> she neglects to mention that he is speaking of what is choiceworthy to humans. “Pigs rejoice in mud more than pure water,” said Heraclitus.<sup>124</sup> Aristotle might well have retorted that humans rejoice in friendship more than pure contemplation. If so, he would no doubt have tempered the retort by adding that contemplation in this life requires friends,<sup>125</sup> among many other things,<sup>126</sup> and that these necessities are among the things that make embodied contemplation impure.

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<sup>120</sup> Supra note 70.

<sup>121</sup> Nussbaum 2001:375. Supra note 14. The most common translations of *eudaimonia* are ‘happiness’ and ‘flourishing.’ The prefix *eu-* means ‘well’ or ‘good’. A *daimōn*, such as the one Socrates claimed to have, is a personal spirit.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.* The passage quoted is *Eth. nic.* 1144a6. Nussbaum adduces nine reasons in total. This first argument synthesizes her first (p. 375), second (p. 375), and fourth (p. 376).

<sup>123</sup> Nussbaum 2001:375–376. Aristotle calls virtue of character choice-worthy for its own sake at 1176b7–9. He esteems friendship a component of happiness at 1169b2–22. This second argument synthesizes Nussbaum’s third (pp. 375–6) and fifth (p. 376) reasons.

<sup>124</sup> Clement, *Strom.* 1.2.2 = 22B13; trans. McKirahan, in Curd 1995:35.

<sup>125</sup> *Eth. nic.* 1170b8–13 and 1177a35–1177b1.

<sup>126</sup> 1178b33–1179a9.

A third argument for downplaying the passages in which Aristotle exalts the contemplative life cites two passages which, Nussbaum believes, indicate that “wishing for the good, both for ourselves and for another, must remain within the confines of our species identity.”<sup>127</sup> It must be conceded that the first of these passages does appear to indicate this: “now if we were right in saying that friend wishes good to friend for his sake,” writes Aristotle, “his friend must remain the sort of being he is, whatever that may be; therefore it is for him only so long as he remains a man [*anthrōpos*] that he will wish the greatest goods.”<sup>128</sup> Accordingly, we must wish our friends the goods of *human*, not divine, life. But a second passage cited by Nussbaum makes it clear that the same does not apply to the good we wish ourselves:

Each man wishes himself what is good, while no one chooses to possess the whole world if he has first to become some one else (for that matter, even now God possesses the good); he wishes this only on condition of being whatever he is; and the element that thinks [*to nooun*] would seem to be the individual man, or to be so more than any other element in him.”<sup>129</sup>

This passage makes explicit the peculiar doctrine that Nussbaum’s anthropocentric interpretation of Aristotle’s ethics has overlooked: we are most of all our *nous*. As a result, this passage weighs not *against* but rather in *favor* of the interpretation of Aristotle’s ethics for which I have argued in this paper.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Nussbaum 2001:376. This third argument represents her seventh and eighth reasons. We have skipped her sixth because it is not so much an independent reason as a reply to a possible objection.

<sup>128</sup> *Eth. nic.* 1159a8–11; trans. Ross, rev. Urmson, in Barnes 1995:1831–1832.

<sup>129</sup> *Eth. nic.* 1166a19–23; trans. Ross, rev. Urmson, in Barnes 1995:1843. See also 1169a1. As her seventh reason, Nussbaum cites— likewise inexplicably—a slightly earlier passage in which Aristotle says that a man does good for his own sake, “(for he does it for the sake of the intellectual element in him, which is thought to be the man himself)” (1166a16–17). The Greek translated here as “intellectual element” is *dianoētikos*, the faculty we examined in detail during our discussion of Aristotle’s psychology (*supra* note 47).

<sup>130</sup> A fourth and final argument against this interpretation appeals to the purported textual incongruity of *EN* 10.6–8. This argument makes two complaints against these three chapters. The first complains that the chapter that follows them turns to moral education and “begins with a summary of what has preceded,” as Nussbaum observes (2001:376–377), and yet “this summary makes no mention of the chapters on contemplation, but gives an orderly summary of the *EN* 10.5.” Chapter 9 does begin, however, with a vague reference to “these matters” (*toutōn*). Nussbaum (2001:377) calls this phrase “a thin allusion indeed

According to this interpretation, the ethics and psychology of Aristotle—no less than of Plato, or for that matter the Pythagoreans—are a program of purification and divinization. Few philosophers nowadays would endorse such a program. Indeed, most would eschew it as anachronistic mumbo-jumbo. And yet, ironically, no ancient Greek philosopher enjoys more respect as a contributor to present debates than does Aristotle. The irony is to some extent a product of the complexity and subtlety of his philosophy. Even as its theocentrism has been ignored, much of value has been extracted from it. Scholars of Aristotle who are eager in this way to mine insights for an anthropocentric philosophical culture such as ours, however, should nonetheless beware that the philosophy they have tapped assumes that we are not really humans but instead pure thought.

This seems to have been Aristotle's position. Philosophers who have been trained to see Aristotle as departing from Plato on these questions have not, to my mind, sufficiently recognized this deep agreement on the nature of ourselves and our ideal life, and so I have sought in this paper to expose this agreement and defend it as an interpretation of Aristotle. My goal, in other words, has been largely exegetical. By way of conclusion, though, I would like to present an Aristotelian critique of this Aristotelian position, exactly in the manner of Aristotelians who have used Aristotelian biology and metaphysics to criticize his own positions on women and natural slaves. In this case, I believe, the resulting problem is far more serious for Aristotelianism, since it elicits a contradiction not

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to the climax of the whole work," but she confuses the climax of life with the climax of the work. Our lives reach their highest end when we achieve pure contemplation, but Aristotle's work continues with a discussion—apparently continuous, in fact, with the work known as *Politics*—of the political expedients required to make such an end achievable. Nussbaum's second textual complaint returns to the beginning of 10.6 and notices that it promises "to give a 'sketch' of *eudaimonia*," even though "a 'sketch' of *eudaimonia* is what 1.7 already claimed to give" (2001:377). The complaint is misplaced. Aristotle is reprising the subject of *eudaimonia* after he has accumulated the insights of *EN* itself. In a similar way, Bach begins and ends his *Goldberg Variations* with the same theme, presenting it a second time after taking us through thirty variations. We hear the theme anew: echoes of the variations now enrich its simplicity. Unlike Bach's, however, Aristotle's reprise is not identical with the original 'sketch' (*tupōi*).

just from his views on women and slaves, who would never have been permitted to attend his lectures on ethics, but even from his views on the very audience of his those lectures.

Critiques of this sort exploit the fact that Aristotle considers virtues to be excellences relative to species. For instance, a lion is not a failed human because it fails to achieve human virtue; rather, it is virtuous or vicious insofar as it achieves or fails to achieve the excellences unique to its own species. The Aristotelian critiques of Aristotle's positions on slaves and women take the form of a dilemma. In the case of natural slaves, either they are members of the human species, but failed members who achieve no virtue and happiness, or they are members of a different species, natural slaves, whose success or failure should be measured according to a different standard. Aristotle wants to have it both ways. He wants natural slaves to be humans, albeit human *tools*, but also to have virtues unique to them, just as any tool has a virtue or excellence all its own. Similarly for women: if they are of the same species as men, then they should have all the same capacities, and thus potentially all the same virtues; but if they have their own set of virtues, as Aristotle believes, then they are not of the same species.

A similar dilemma can be posed for "us," the audience of Aristotle's lectures on ethics. If we are really *nous*, then we can never in this life achieve our proper virtue and happiness, which is pure thought. If Aristotle is right, we have no more hope of thinking purely than a lion has of fighting in formation, or a slave has of commanding the army, or a woman has of philosophizing. But if we can achieve some virtue and happiness here, as Aristotle also seems to think, then we are not really *nous* but instead something different. According to his cosmic hierarchy, humans may be inferior to pure thought, but this should trouble them no more than it troubles the lion to be inferior to humans. For the lion, after all, it is better to succeed as a lion than to fail in a futile effort to achieve human virtue. For humans, then, it would seem better to succeed as humans than to "strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us." Since humans are not substances in the primary sense, however, it is not clear that any sense can be made of succeeding as a human.

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